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‘Love me or hate me – I don’t care’: Katie Hopkins, *Celebrity Big Brother* and the destruction of a negative image

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Abstract

This article aims to analyse the appearance of controversial British columnist Katie Hopkins on reality television series *Celebrity Big Brother*. Katie Hopkins made a name for herself as a public figure as a result of attracting public criticism for her harsh views on a range of topics from obesity to welfare reform. This notoriety led to her 2014 appearance on the British edition of *Celebrity Big Brother*. During Hopkins' time on the series, cracks began to form in her carefully cultivated negative public image; given her relatively unique approach towards courting controversy, this transformation was particularly profound and provoked a number of questions regarding the 'celebreality' genre and its impact on the prominent personalities that become involved.

Key Words

Media, reality television, public relations, celebrity, Big Brother

Introduction

In the modern era of media saturation, the cultivation of a celebrity's public image is no longer simply a matter of a talented individual expressing their personal identity. Media identities regularly engage in the deliberate construction of a public persona that is designed to capture the attention of an audience; whilst the vast majority of celebrities concern themselves with maintaining a positive reputation within the cultural discourse, many public figures take part in highly considered campaigns to form a controversial and often negative image within the cultural zeitgeist. Although it may appear counterintuitive for a celebrity to intentionally engage in behaviour rejected within the mainstream, the archetypal pantomime villain has consistently proven to be a figure of fascination within Western culture. These characters thrive on the negative reaction of the public, and often develop a cult following

amongst those that agree with their unpopular opinions or can otherwise relate to their background and motivations. Recent trends in the Western media have led to new avenues for the development of pantomime villains through the rise of the celebrity socio-political commentator. These prominent personalities maintain their celebrity status – and, as such, their financial viability – by taking strong positions on social issues that are typically divisive and often controversial. For many of these pseudo-celebrity commentators, the maintenance of a negative public image is essential to their continued survival within the cutthroat modern media; this is particularly true for female commentators, who have traditionally struggled to achieve the same level of success in the field as their male counterparts.

By taking on the role of controversial pantomime villain, female columnists like British reality television personality Katie Hopkins have been able to achieve public recognition and notoriety on a level that may not have been attainable if they were more concerned with the maintenance of a positive reputation. A savvy media operator, Hopkins rose to global prominence after making comments that were deemed offensive in a series of appearances on British television; labelled the most hated woman in the United Kingdom, Hopkins was selected to participate in the fifteenth series of *Celebrity Big Brother UK*, in which she would live for over a month alongside other well-known figures such as playboy Calum Best, celebrity blogger Perez Hilton and former glamour model Katie Price. Although her inclusion attracted considerable criticism prior to the series' premiere, Hopkins proved to a surprisingly popular contestant during the programme's 2015 run and ultimately survived several public votes to place as runner-up behind eventual winner Katie Price. Despite her apparent success on *Celebrity Big Brother*, several analysts questioned whether the redemption of her public persona would have a detrimental impact on the carefully-designed characterisation of Hopkins as a provocative hate-figure. As a commentator who effectively made a living by acting as a pantomime villain, the newly-positive public perception of Hopkins directly affected her media brand and compromised the simplistic understanding that she was an inherently 'nasty' person outside of her role as a commentator. Indeed, rather than having full control of her public image via the limited exposure of short television appearances and opinion columns, Hopkins placed herself essentially at the mercy of *Celebrity Big Brother* producers; as a result, she became vulnerable to the editing of her personal narrative into an classic redemption arc designed to endear her to an audience at the expense of her marketability as a professional antagonist. Her appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother* played a

considerable role in rehabilitating Katie Hopkins' public image, however this may have had considerable unforeseen consequences for her celebrity brand in an environment that values the pantomime villain as a media commodity.

Background

Celebrity culture and the foundations of 'celebreality'

Although it has seen a significant rise in prominence during the past twenty years, reality television is hardly a new addition to the media landscape. Game shows such as *Cash and Carry* or *Beat the Clock* were common on American television throughout the 1940s and 1950s, whilst the unscripted British docudrama *Seven Up!* clearly demonstrated a profound public interest in the real lives of ordinary individuals (Wilshire 2007: 110). The television debut of *Seven Up!* was swiftly followed in 1965 by the premiere of possibly the first reality programme to feature celebrities in an unscripted media environment; airing on American network ABC, *The American Sportsman* ran for twenty-one years and saw prominent celebrities like Bing Crosby and Andy Griffith participate in outdoor recreational activities alongside members of their own family (Adessa 2012). The involvement of celebrities and their family members in *The American Sportsman* cannot be compared with the media juggernaut formed by the Kardashian family in recent years, however it does provide evidence that well-known figures have traditionally been drawn to reality television as a means of cultivating or consolidating a public image. It was also one of the first instances wherein reality television actively documented unscripted interactions between individuals without the competitive angle of a game show; in this sense, *The American Sportsman* was an early precursor to the candid reality programming favoured by celebrities in the modern era.

Despite the fact that celebrity-oriented reality television had seen resurgence in popularity with the 2002 premiere of *The Osbournes* on MTV, it had not fully entered the cultural zeitgeist until a boom in its prevalence on American television in the mid-2000s. The term 'celebreality' was popularized by cable broadcaster VH1 in 2005 as a way of promoting *The Surreal Life*, a program analogous to *Celebrity Big Brother* in the sense that it featured a range of well-known figures living in a house together. The term 'celebreality' is a

portmanteau of the words ‘celebrity’ and ‘reality’, soon after coming to describe more convoluted television formats which saw celebrities like rapper Flavor Flav search for love in a pseudo-*Bachelor* competition (Montemurro 2008: 87). Prior to its usage by VH1, journalist Joyce Millman used it in a 2003 article that appeared in *The New York Times* in which she described a recent trend of celebrities “elbowing their way in” to the reality television landscape, effectively turning the “notion of reality TV upside down.” Both VH1 and Millman’s use of the term ‘celebreality’ may have brought the genre further into the public consciousness, it should be noted that Millman’s usage of the term came around two years after the premiere of *Celebrity Big Brother* in the United Kingdom, suggesting that the concept of celebrities appearing in reality television was more established in British television than it was in American programming in the early days of the ‘celebreality’ format.

Celebrity Big Brother

British reality television programme *Celebrity Big Brother* originally premiered on 9 March, 2001, and was intended as a one-off event that could capitalize on the considerable success of the regular edition of *Big Brother*. Similarly to its parent series, *Celebrity Big Brother* involved a diverse range of well-known identities living together; cut-off from the outside world, cameras observed as these ‘celebrities’ interacted with each other, often forming unlikely friendships or intense rivalries (Jones & Mathijs 2004: 65). Commercial success led broadcaster Channel 4 to renew *Celebrity Big Brother* for several more years, with the series continuing on Channel 5 when the rival network purchased the rights to the *Big Brother* format in 2011 (Sweeney 2015). Celebrities are financially compensated for appearing on the programme, with these fees negotiated on an individual basis depending on the perceived ‘value’ of the individual being recruited to participate; in the 2015 season alone, appearance fees ranged between a reported £500 000 offered to glamour model Katie Price and the considerably smaller £20 000 earned by well-known comedian Keith Chegwin (Darvill 2015). The financial compensation and media platform offered by the series has attracted a wide array of prominent individuals to *Celebrity Big Brother*, with international icons like actor Gary Busey and boxer Evander Holyfield living alongside lesser-known talent from British reality television like *Geordie Shore*’s Charlotte Crosby and Dee Kelly from documentary series *Benefits Street*. Despite its reputation for attracting D-list talent in lieu of ‘real celebrities’, *Celebrity Big Brother* has consistently proven to be popular with British

audiences and serves as a vehicle for prominent people to communicate their identity directly to a broader audience than they would normally command.

The fifteenth season of *Celebrity Big Brother* premiered on 7 January, 2015, and quickly became notorious for both its selection of housemates and several controversial incidents that led to the immediate expulsion of several celebrities from the competition. The inclusion of controversial commentator Katie Hopkins and celebrity blogger Perez Hilton attracted negative attention prior to the series launch, however this criticism was quickly overtaken after former *Baywatch* star Jeremy Jackson was removed for making inappropriate sexual advances towards a female housemate on Day 4; this was followed by the removal of *Coronation Street* actor Ken Morley for repeatedly using inappropriate language on Day 6, and the voluntary departure of soul singer Alexander O'Neal on Day 11 after a series of altercations with Hilton (Archibald & Wilcock 2015). In the aftermath of these departures, the series focused on an ongoing feud which pitted Hopkins and Hilton against each other; despite going into the house bearing the label of 'Britain's most hated woman', rallying against the erratic and often immature antics of Hilton contributed considerably to Hopkins' rising popularity with bookmakers listing the columnist as the 2/1 favourite to win the competition during the series' final ten days (Heffron 2015). Although the public's perception of Hopkins improved significantly during her stint on *Celebrity Big Brother* she did not win the competition, losing in the series finale to latecomer Katie Price who joined the program on Day 9 after the removal of Jackson and Morley. This controversial season of *Celebrity Big Brother* had a positive impact on the series' ratings, with an average of 3.1 million viewers tuning in throughout its four-week run; these ratings make the fifteenth season the most watched edition of the programme since it premiered on Channel 5 in 2011.

Katie Hopkins

Controversial commentator Katie Hopkins initially came to public prominence after participating in the third season of popular business-reality television series *The Apprentice UK*. Prior to her appearance on the programme in 2006, Hopkins had undergone military training at the prestigious Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and worked for several years as a business consultant in New York City. After completing her military training at Sandhurst,

Hopkins was unable to take up a commission in the British army due to her development of adult-onset epilepsy and instead turned her attention to the business world (Selby 2014). Hopkins became notorious during her time on *The Apprentice UK* after making pointedly critical comments about her fellow contestants and turning down an offer from businessman Alan Sugar to participate in the series finale. After her withdrawal from *The Apprentice UK*, Hopkins became a regular feature on British television and went on to participate in the seventh series of *I'm A Celebrity... Get Me Out Of Here!* in 2007. It was during this period that she first began writing an opinion column, however she was asked to leave this role with the *Express & Echo* newspaper after a reader poll demanded that she be fired by the Exeter-based publication (Daily Mail 2007). Despite the abrupt end to this early foray into journalism, Hopkins would go on to carve out a niche for herself as a controversial commentator on a range of television programmes and in newspapers throughout the United Kingdom.

Hopkins returned to public prominence in July 2013 after an appearance on ITV's *This Morning* programme in which she made comments that were deemed by many to be classist and offensive. She noted that she often judged her children's classmates based solely on their name, claiming that "a name, for me, is a short way of working out what class that child comes from" and that she did not want her own children associating with people that were from a "lower class" (Battersby 2013). Hopkins' controversial statement regarding social class were not the only comment to attract criticism, with insensitive remarks about the 2013 Glasgow helicopter crash and a British nurse who had contracted Ebola leading up to her appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother* in January 2015. Shortly before her appearance on the reality television competition, Hopkins completed a documentary called *My Fat Story* in which she purposefully gained 19 kilograms in an effort to prove that obese people could lose weight through diet and exercise; her pronouncement that that "what fat people need is a kick up the arse" sparked renewed public antipathy towards the commentator and undoubtedly contributed to the desire of the *Celebrity Big Brother* production team to have Hopkins appear on the programme (McLysaght 2014). Her notoriety within the British media led tabloid newspaper *The Sun* to sign her as a regular columnist, giving Hopkins a platform to continue expressing her provocative viewpoint to a nationwide audience with a circulation of around 2.2 million readers daily (Sweeney 2014).

Hopkins' public persona largely centred on her characterisation as a conservative traditionalist with a pronounced disdain for those that she deemed to be of a lower social standing than herself. These forthright views are seemingly at odds with the target market of her employers at *The Sun*, often perceived to be the paper of choice for the very kind of working class Britons regularly criticised in her columns as lazy, overweight or otherwise trashy (Chan & Goldthorpe 2007). Although the populist media may not appear to be a comfortable fit for the old-fashioned traditionalist views espoused by Hopkins, it is clear that her perspective shares commonalities with those of a middle England concerned with a cultural drift often attributed to rising immigration, greater engagement with Europe and a generally liberal attitude toward diversity (Bonnett 1998). It is this socio-political position that simultaneously made Hopkins both a popular and unique character within the *Celebrity Big Brother* cohort: whilst her conservative views set her apart from the typically liberal celebrities that she was forced to cohabitate with, they also appealed to a broad cross-section of the program's viewers who felt that she spoke plain truths that were more in tune with the sentiment of the general public than those of other public figures involved in the program who could be seen as out-of-touch. In this sense, Hopkins' public image shares many similarities with the archetypal female conservative in the former prime minister Margaret Thatcher; much like the Iron Lady herself, Hopkins' opinionated attitude assisted her in garnering support within the British community based on her forthright approach and a perceived strength of character.

Current scholarly analysis of reality television and public image

Despite a wide range of existing research analysing the construction of fictional female villains in popular culture, there is a notable gap in literature when it comes to celebrities that have successfully cultivated a similarly controversial public image. Trading on the marketability a negative public persona is a tactic that has been utilized by prominent figures throughout history, however the relatively recent rise of the reality television genre has fundamentally changed the way in which the phenomenon is manifested in the modern era. Bell (2011) noted the particular trend towards the cultivation of a "bad girl" image in British media personalities; Bell claimed that the rise of the "bad girl" in British popular culture was an extension of the pop-feminist movement of the 1990s, expressed in "a new kind of

liberated and empowered femininity marked by assertiveness, provocation, and success” (Bell 2011: 199). Meyers also suggested that the celebrity is a “site of tension and ambiguity in which an active audience has the space to make meaning of their world by accepting or rejecting the social values embodied by a celebrity image” (2009: 890). Meyers’ assessment of the general public’s interaction with a celebrity’s public persona provides an interesting prism through which it is possible to understand the fascination with controversial or villainous media personalities. This is particularly the case when it comes to participants in reality television programmes, whose public image is essentially co-opted by producers and editors to convey a viable narrative that often requires a villain or foil to be marketable and hold audience attention.

Authenticity and image management has been an aspect of reality television that researchers have focused on in an effort to understand the appeal of the genre. Rose and Wood noted the common criticism of reality television viewers as “passive voyeurs”; the article disputed this perspective, instead claiming that reality television viewers were actively engaged with the media product, having been given “the chance to compare and contrast their own lives with those of the show’s ‘protagonist’” (Rose & Wood 2005: 284). Judith Lancioni, in an article primarily analysing the ethical considerations of reality competition *Survivor*, noted the importance of editing in the construction of ‘characters’ within the reality genre; she questioned whether cutting over 100 hours of recording into an hour-long episode led to editing that “create(d) heroes and villains, dramatic personae that are untrue to the off-screen personalities of contestants” (Lancioni 2003: 150). Whereas Lancioni was concerned with the public image of contestants being edited out of context, Richard M. Huff claimed in his 2006 book on reality television that “players now go into reality shows with agents, and knowing that the loudest, brashest contestant gets the most air time” (Huff 2006: 171). Huff said that the reality genre had become a “haven for wannabe actors” wherein most contestants were “looking for something more than just a shot at a prize” such as a more long-term career as a media personality (Huff 2006: 171). Although Huff’s analysis focused largely on the American reality television industry, the same model can be applied to British programming in which ordinary people can gain access to a national media spotlight through the considered exhibition of a premeditated or otherwise contrived on-screen persona.

Given its relative longevity within the reality television genre, there is a substantial amount of literature which serves to analyse and deconstruct the British version of *Celebrity Big Brother*. Cardo (2005) claimed that television programs like *Big Brother* provided “ordinary” Britons with the kind of accessibility and visibility usually retained by politicians or celebrities; according to Cardo, this affords the program and the broader genre a kind of democratisation that serves to cultivate public investment in the product. The inherent reality of *Big Brother* effectively satisfies what van Zoonen (2001) described as the audience’s “nostalgic yearning for authenticity”; in this sense, the purported portrayal of real people and real interactions in *Big Brother* assumes a kind of post-modern role as refreshingly unique amidst the saturation of manufactured modern media. Griffen-Foley reinforced the role that the *Big Brother* format played in cultivating audience investment; her 2004 exploration of audience participation in the media claimed that *Big Brother* was only the latest medium by which the notion of a passive media consumer was blurred through a symbiotic relationship between product and audience. Whether or not the characters portrayed on screen are ‘real’, the audience undoubtedly is given a sense of control over the narrative due to their role in either saving or voting off those that they no longer wish to participate in the series. In this way, the format of *Big Brother* inherently demands a greater level of audience participation and emotional investment in the on screen narrative in order for the program to be a commercial success.

Although there is a breadth of research that references the programme and its place within the genre, the vast majority of specific studies into *Celebrity Big Brother* are related to a racism controversy that occurred during the series’ 2007 edition. Several of these studies use the incident involving Jade Goody, Jo O’Meara, Danielle Lloyd and Shilpa Shetty as a means of exploring attitudes towards ethnicity and racism within society; Riggs asserted that – aside from the societal implications of the incident – the actions of celebrities accused of racism were important in that “they rendered visible the machinations of celebrity culture and the capacity of individual celebrities to impact upon those with whom they have never had contact” (Riggs 2009: 224). In a similar manner, Gies’ 2009 article on the racism controversy suggested that the humanisation of celebrities via the *Big Brother* format led viewers to believe that “celebrity is equally available to all” and played a considerable role in “the apparent determination of some to pursue it at all costs.” Barron concurred with this view by claiming that the British series was a prime example of the “steady convergence” between a

programme representing the lives of real people and “the establishment of a particular mode of celebrity... constructed by the *Big Brother* audience, but more crucially by the show’s producers.” (Barron 2010: 27) Despite the simplicity of its format, it is clear that the *Big Brother* programme has a significant role to play in assisting researchers to understand the evolution of celebrity culture in the United Kingdom.

Ethnographic observation in modern media consumption

In order to examine the impact that Katie Hopkins’ appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother* had on her pre-existing public persona, it is important to engage with two distinct avenues of qualitative research and ethnographic observation. The format of *Celebrity Big Brother* provides considerable assistance to researchers, with a lack of engagement with the outside world serving as both an essential aspect of the programme and an important element in minimising the amount of variables typically involved in observing a social phenomenon (Campbell 1957: 298). This allows Hopkins’ actions to be considered within the context of the show itself, given that her interactions are solely with other contestants and the show’s production team; although editing and performance undoubtedly still plays a role in governing her behaviour, her restriction to a single environment with a relatively stable group of people undoubtedly allows the researcher to make assumptions that would have been otherwise impossible if the observation were to take place in the outside world. By observing Hopkins’ behaviour on *Celebrity Big Brother*, it is possible to determine which specific actions may have contributed to the rehabilitation of her public image and whether or not these actions were undertaken purposefully.

Observing the circumstances that led to a shift in the viewers’ perception of Katie Hopkins is essential to this study, however it is equally as important to monitor public reaction to her actions in order to properly gauge public sentiment. Reality television in the United Kingdom places a high value on social media as a way to engage with an audience and generate online conversation about the programme; *Celebrity Big Brother* and its companion show *Big Brother’s Bit on the Side* utilize specific hashtags on Twitter as a means of quantifying public opinion throughout the series on both events taking place on-screen and the general popularity of the housemates (Marres & Weltevrede 2013: 314). The overt usage of these

metrics are beneficial in analysing shifts in public opinions regarding an individual housemate like Katie Hopkins, given that it is possible to chart negative commentary regarding her initial announcement as a contestant to the more positive social media support that accompanied her being named as the competition's runner-up several weeks later. In addition to conducting an examination of social media to determine these trends, it is also useful to analyse the traditional media's reportage on the series and Hopkins' role within its narrative; given that Hopkins was - and continues to be - a divisive character within the tabloid media, press reaction to her appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother* may have had some influence on changing public sentiment towards her as the protagonist of the programme's 2015 winter edition. By combining the qualitative observation of her behaviour on *Celebrity Big Brother* with an analysis of changing public sentiment outside the house, it is possible to determine what factors led to Katie Hopkins' image transformation and whether this impacted on the cultivation of her persona as a controversial pantomime villain within the British media landscape.

Discussion

Image management in the *Celebrity Big Brother* franchise

Aside from financial compensation and appearance fees, there are a range of reasons that celebrities may decide to participate in a reality television programme. The most frequently used justification is that of image rehabilitation, which has regularly and openly been used by participants in *Celebrity Big Brother* when asked to describe their motivations prior to entering the *Big Brother* house (Walker 2015). Citing image management issues as a reason for participating in *Celebrity Big Brother* is particularly notable when it comes to the subsection of tabloid celebrities that have chosen to participate in the programme throughout its fourteen years on air. Individuals in this category are typically well-known for reasons aside from their primary occupation as a singer or actor; they have often been featured in the British media for negative behaviour including extra-marital sex scandals or drug abuse allegations (Burnett 2015). Indeed, tabloid celebrities like 2012 contestant Natasha Giggs were solely in the public eye as a result of a controversial scandal: Giggs was known at the time of her participation for an affair with brother-in-law and professional footballer Ryan Giggs, and claimed that her appearance on the programme was a means of influencing public

sentiment in her favour (Dunkerley & Hall 2012). Giggs provides a classic example of the kind of controversial figure regularly chosen by *Celebrity Big Brother* producers in an attempt to capitalize on tabloid appeal and generate publicity for the programme within the mainstream media.

For its fifteenth season, *Celebrity Big Brother* selected a number of contestants that were primarily known for their involvement in scandalous incidents covered by the tabloid media. Footballer's son and reality television regular Calum Best was labelled a "love rat" for his involvement with various women and glamour model Alicia Douvall was known as a notorious "kiss-and-tell" personality who regularly sold stories to the press about her sordid affairs with famous men (Fahy & Thomas 2015); despite the participation of these characters, the most notable example of a tabloid media celebrity in the 2015 series of *Celebrity Big Brother* was undoubtedly Katie Hopkins. Whilst many prominent figures make the decision to participate in the programme at the nadir of their public prominence, Hopkins was at the peak of her public recognition during the winter of 2014/15 after a series of controversial media appearances and the release of documentary *My Fat Story* (Daly 2015). Furthermore - unlike the majority of her fellow tabloid celebrities - Hopkins explicitly claimed that she had little interest in cultivating a more positive public image through her appearance on the series; upon entering to jeers from the crowd on launch night, Hopkins smiled and encouraged further condemnation after claiming that she did not "care if you love me or hate me." In fact, rather than shy away from her previous controversies, Hopkins reinforced her tabloid characterisation by openly stating that "I don't like fat people, I'm not a fan of gingers and I don't like unemployed people." (Fahy 2015) By purposefully reinforcing and encouraging negative reaction to her appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother*, Hopkins revealed a strategy which involved the assumption of a villainous role within the series; this preconceived game plan would ultimately not come to fruition, with another celebrity assuming an antagonistic role and forcing Hopkins into the uncomfortable position of reality television heroism.

The fallen woman in reality television

In her 2009 analysis of long-running dating series *The Bachelor*, Dubrofsky claimed that the portrayal of a woman having an emotionally intense moment on reality television is akin to

the pornographic “money shot” in that it represents the climactic moment of a fallen woman’s narrative journey. Dubrofsky claims that the display of emotional women is a “hallmark of many reality shows”; this perspective is supported by Kavka, who notes that the very nature of reality television allows for greater emotional investment in characters portrayed on screen. She claims that reality television series are essentially sites of “constructed unmediation” wherein viewers are given the sense that they are witnessing a real world situation despite the intervention of the television as a medium of transmission (Kavka 2005). This is particularly the case when it comes to the archetype of the *fallen woman*, a characterisation which has traditionally referenced a woman’s lack of chastity but can be expanded upon to reference any female character that rejects the masculine authority of a husband or father (Auerbach 1980). The construction of a fallen woman can often be understood through the Jungian prism of the anima and animus, outlining the unconsciously gender-orientated characteristics of the human psyche; while the fallen woman does not inherently take on masculine qualities as a result of her rejection of male authority, her actions may be the expression of repressed male tendencies referred to as *the animus* (Goldenberg 1976). It is clear that women portrayed in reality television can be perceived in a myriad of ways, informing the viewer’s opinion of their behaviour and influencing their emotional connection with the subject.

Throughout her appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother*, Katie Hopkins took on the characteristics of both the fallen woman and the woman expressing the traditionally masculine qualities of the animus. Hopkins’ public persona prior to her appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother* was largely based on her assertive and opinionated nature, which was often seen to be at odds with the kind of behaviour expected within a polite society. As such, her expression of explicit vulnerability during a personal attack from a fellow contestant on Day 4 of the competition exposed viewers to an aspect of Hopkins’ character that they may not have previously been aware existed. During a task in which celebrities shared embarrassing elements of their past, Hopkins was confronted by American gossip blogger Perez Hilton about having sex with her current husband Mark Cross whilst he was still married to his previous partner. Hopkins admitted to their extra-marital liaison, after which Hilton used crude language to aggressively attack her over the incident; Hopkins passively accepted Hilton’s vitriolic criticism until the intervention of other housemates forced the discussion to a conclusion (Pocklington 2015). More than any other moment, this incident

early in the series transformed Hopkins into a sympathetic character and Hilton into the villainous role of an aggressor; by attacking Hopkins for her personal and sexual history in such a manner, Hilton inadvertently cast her as a fallen woman that was being unfairly maligned and victimized as a result of her sexuality. This would have significant implications later in the series, with Hilton finding it difficult to garner sympathy over claims that Hopkins had “bullied” him given this earlier behaviour.

It is possible for the fallen woman to be cast in a positive light by reality television producers, however these characters ultimately face a risk of being seen as powerless and victimized. This potential portrayal of the fallen woman was seen in *Celebrity Big Brother* through the appearance of glamour model Alicia Douvall, who was treated poorly as the result of her scandalous history and an apparent lack of education; although Douvall was treated sympathetically by producers, her inability to defend herself adequately led to lack of audience engagement and a relatively early exit from the competition (Kelly 2015). Much of the early sympathy for Hopkins was also derived from the perception that she was a fallen woman that had been unfairly maligned, however her engagement with the qualities of her animus gave her the depth of character necessary to defend her position and gain the approval of viewers. Unlike Douvall, Hopkins responded to Hilton in a calm and assertive manner and would go on to aggressively defend her fellow housemates throughout the series whenever she felt that they had been mistreated. In this sense, Hopkins’ adopted the role of the defender – or what Jung described as a “man of action” – and proved that she had the emotional strength to take care of herself and those close to her (Day 2015). By showing a degree of vulnerability in being cast as a fallen woman, Hopkins gave viewers a reason to re-evaluate their preconceived notions of her as a character; by aggressively defending her position and those around her, Hopkins went further by giving the audience permission to actively root for her as a protagonist rather than a victim.

Purposefully cultivating a controversial public persona

It is a common maxim within the celebrity branding arena that there is no such thing as bad publicity. This statement refers to the belief that remaining in the public consciousness is the paramount predicate to being a celebrity, and that it is essential to remain a part of the

cultural discourse in order to maintain currency and commercial value. Thompson (1998: 141) attributed the mainstream media's preoccupation with controversial behaviour to an increasingly competitive journalistic marketplace in which publications are "competing with each other to present dramatic narratives and spectacles with a strong moral content." The purposeful attempt by media producers to manufacture a sense of moral outrage amongst their audience is a cornerstone aspect of both reality television programming and Katie Hopkins' career as a tabloid columnist; whereas series' like *Celebrity Big Brother* court controversy by placing their contestants in situations designed to push them to their emotional limits, Hopkins' socio-political commentary intentionally utilizes inflammatory rhetoric with the intention of attracting broader media coverage and public recognition for her personal brand (Loya & Selkin 1979). By engaging in behaviour designed to be controversial and provoke an adverse response, Hopkins has successfully developed a unique media niche which is fuelled by advocating unpopular or offensive positions. With a negative public reaction at the heart of the Katie Hopkins brand, it is unclear what affect the rehabilitation of her image on *Celebrity Big Brother* would have on her future professional outcomes.

Social media provides an outlet for celebrities in the modern media landscape to directly address a broad audience and express their opinion in a way that is not mediated through another publication or production team. Many prominent figures successfully utilize services like Twitter to interact with fans and set the record straight when rumour and innuendo is published about them in the media; those celebrities whose brand depends on cultivating a negative public persona, however, have taken to using the social media platform as a means of attracting followers and remaining as part of the public discourse in a non-traditional manner (Holmes & Redmond 2014). Hopkins' behaviour on Twitter has often been referred to as "trolling", referring to online activity in which a user intentionally posts offensive or inflammatory material in order to trigger an emotional reaction from other users (Bishop 2014). More than any other medium, social media is the environment in which the majority of Hopkins' recent controversial statements have originated. These provocative statements on Twitter range from darkly humorous to outright attempts to malign an individual or group within society; Hopkins makes clearly tongue-in-cheek comments like "Ramadan typically brings a spike in violence in Middle East. I get grumpy when I don't eat – but I don't blow things up" (29 June, 2014) whilst, on the other hand, making pointedly disparaging comments about an ethnic group such as "Gypsies are ferrel (sic) humans – we have no duty to them"

(21 May, 2014). By maintaining a constant stream of offensive content via her Twitter account, Hopkins has been able to develop a controversial reputation outside of her role as a media commentator; this generally negative public response resulted in her apparent image rehabilitation during *Celebrity Big Brother* being more notable both to audiences and other participants in the reality series.

Due to her profoundly negative reputation within British society, the transformation of Katie Hopkins into a sympathetic and vulnerable character during her time on *Celebrity Big Brother* was a shocking twist in the series' narrative. Hopkins did not display an overtly emotional reaction to the series of aggressive attacks she faced from Perez Hilton throughout the series, however showed a considerably more sensitive response to the positive comments of those she grew close to during her time on the series (Ahmed 2015). After receiving a compliment from housemate Michelle Visage, Hopkins cried in the privacy of the diary room as she described her inability to take compliments in the same way that she is able to accept the overwhelming public criticism her brand regularly attracts; Hopkins described her belief that it was important to be "tough" whereas compliments could be seen as a sign of "weakness" (Ahmed 2015). This moment of vulnerability occurred relatively early in the series, shortly after she was publically confronted about her sexual history by one of her fellow contestants, and undoubtedly contributed to the audience's belief that the more vulnerable character seen on screen was the "real" version of Hopkins personality (Pilcher 2015). Differentiation between the version of Hopkins seen on *Celebrity Big Brother* and her controversial public persona was essential to foster an emotional investment in the character, with viewers giving themselves permission to support Hopkins on the understanding that her controversial history was an artificial aspect of her public persona as a pantomime villain.

Oppositional relationships and the impact on public perception

Whilst unexpected demonstrations of vulnerability contributed significant towards endearing her to *Celebrity Big Brother* viewers, Katie Hopkins' highly antagonistic relationship with fellow housemate Perez Hilton played an equally important role in casting her as a heroic figure within the narrative. Hilton divided audience opinion throughout his time in the *Big Brother* house as a result of behaviour that was typically portrayed as intentionally

provocative; Hilton regularly attempted to lick the faces of other celebrity contestants during arguments, encouraged female housemates to engage in a faux-lesbian affair to obtain “camera time” and regularly complained to producers that he felt bullied and victimised by other contestants. Although they were often described as being more similar than they were different, Hopkins and Hilton maintained an aggressive rivalry throughout the series which largely overshadowed the character arcs of their fellow competitors; their ongoing dispute had a polarising impact on viewers, as well as effectively forcing housemates to choose whether to pledge their support to either Hopkins or Hilton (Corner 2015). More than any other singular aspect of her time on *Celebrity Big Brother*, Hopkins’ opposition to Hilton was the primary factor in rehabilitating her image amongst viewers of the series. By placing themselves on opposite extremes of the household dynamic, Hopkins and Hilton fostered an oppositional relationship that resulted in a bipolar public reaction; in doing so viewers opposed to Hilton’s eccentric behaviour were subconsciously directed to support Hopkins, while the opposite became true for audience members supporting Hilton’s perspective. As the series progressed, Hilton’s emotional instability and offensive behaviour was increasingly rejected by the *Celebrity Big Brother* audience and led to Hopkins’ popularity experiencing a rise that was relatively proportionate (Earnshaw 2015). It is difficult to gauge public sentiment from within the *Big Brother* house, given the housemates’ minimal exposure to the outside world during their time on the series; that being said, Hopkins’ perspective on Hilton throughout the series were typically in accordance with that of the British public and had an undeniable influence on the audience’s engagement with her as a relatable character rather than a pantomime villain.

The dispute between Hopkins and Hilton during the 2015 series of *Celebrity Big Brother* was undoubtedly grounded in a genuine animosity, however viewers and other housemates regularly questioned whether their actions were deliberately designed to elicit an audience reaction. During a panel discussion hosted by broadcaster Eamonn Holmes in the final week of the series, housemate Keith Chegwin openly claimed that he thought the duo were “play-acting” and that their dispute was a disingenuous way of earning camera time on *Celebrity Big Brother*’s nightly broadcast (Roberts 2015). Chegwin’s perspective was shared by a considerable faction of the audience, particularly in the aftermath of an incident involving Hilton shortly after his return from a brief absence; on this occasion, Hilton chased Hopkins around the house in an attempt to literally “kiss and make up” with his former nemesis.

Despite their prolonged feud, Hopkins giggled and playfully wrestled with Hilton throughout the exchange which prompted many to argue that viewers had been manipulated by the pair in several of their previous altercations with each other (Gordon 2015). If this perspective is accepted, it may suggest that the rehabilitation of Hopkins reputation on *Celebrity Big Brother* was a premeditated action, rather than an unintended by-product of the series exposing the more vulnerable and sensitive features of her personality. The audiences ready acceptance of Hopkins' perceived 'soft side' could be seen as a prime example of van Zoonen's claim that audiences seek out the nostalgia of authenticity in reality television; viewers are ready and willing to engage with Hopkins' demonstrating more complex layers to her personality and seemingly reward her for showing an "authentic" reaction to the events that she becomes involved in. Although it is inherently possible that this was her intention, evaluation of the Hopkins-Hilton feud suggests that Hopkins was genuinely disinterested in making a fundamental change to her controversial public persona. In the aftermath of her appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother*, Hopkins controversial commentary has essentially escalated and, as such, it is unlikely that transforming her image and courting public support was a primary goal of her reality television experience.

Changing social media reaction to Katie Hopkins' appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother*

Reality television viewers in the United Kingdom often chose to engage with series like *Celebrity Big Brother* through social media and, as such, monitoring these platforms can be a useful way to understand trends in public opinion. As Griffen-Foley (2004) claimed, the *Big Brother* format lends itself to active media consumption as demonstrated through the voting platforms that provide much of the program's drama; this could be taken further by the inclusion of social media reaction to events transpiring on screen as encouraged by the *Big Brother* production team. Analysing audience sentiment on a platform like Twitter is particularly valuable when it comes to a character like Katie Hopkins, who has consistently utilized the service to engage with fans and detractors both before and after her *Celebrity Big Brother* experience. By regularly requesting that audience members tweet their opinions using contestant-specific hashtags like #CBBKatie, it is possible to refine any search to specific celebrities and interactions in which they are mentioned on each day of the competition. Given her overwhelmingly negative public reputation prior to appearing on the series, it is to be expected that social media interactions regarding Hopkins' were general

negative on and around the *Celebrity Big Brother* launch on 7 January, 2015. Viewers like @EmzLouise_1989 commented that if they were in the *Celebrity Big Brother* house they would “put #CBBKatie in her place! She’s a rude annoying bully who needs to grow up”; others were more personal in their criticism, with users like @tonegstace tweeting that Hopkins was “an immature witless ugly horse.” Prominent figures associated with *Celebrity Big Brother* also took to Twitter to analyse Hopkins’ behaviour on launch night including resident body language expert Dr Pam Spurr, who was one of the first to label the contestant as “like a panto villain in a secret task – some of the mean-girl stuff seems a bit of an act.” Although there was a scattered offering of positive comments regarding Hopkins’ appearance, the social media consensus on launch night suggested that *Celebrity Big Brother* viewers were initially opposed to Hopkins’ inclusion in the series.

The shifting social media response towards Katie Hopkins was most evident when combined with commentary about household rival Perez Hilton. In a reflection of their oppositional relationship throughout the series, opinion on social media was divided after the conflict between them came to a head on 18 January, 2015; after an altercation with Hilton led soul singer Alexander O’Neal to voluntarily leave the competition, Hopkins and Hilton entered into an argument that saw social media sentiment turn in favour of the British columnist. Viewers like @policydoubter tweeted that “#CBBPerez worst human being ever. A disgrace to humanity... #katiehopkins to win”; others like @wood197302 directly referenced the feud between Hopkins and Hilton in saying “#CBBPerez @PerezHilton our #ccbKatie @KTHopkins pissed over your ass.” It is clear that negativity towards Hilton on Twitter had an inversely positive affect on Hopkins’ social media support. By the time that her argument with Hilton had gone to air, Twitter users had started to predict that Hopkins would win the competition. Viewers like @DeclanV_2 increasingly began to associate themselves with #teamhopkins and making comment like “Katie Hopkins is the only good thing left in that show”; this support on social media would continue until the 6 February grand finale which would ultimately see her finish as the series’ runner-up. Users claimed that she had been the “best housemate for years” (@copey87, 5 February) and that “@KTHopkins needs to be on telly so much more” (@DavidJames1997, 5 February). It is clear that a significant shift in public sentiment occurred during Hopkins’ month-long tenure in the *Celebrity Big Brother* house, with social media providing an insight into the specific details of her image rehabilitation throughout the series.

Conclusion

At the time that controversial columnist Katie Hopkins entered the *Celebrity Big Brother* house, her public persona was that of an aggressively rude and elitist pantomime villain. As the series progressed, a range of factors contributed to the rehabilitation of her image in the perspective of a significant sector of the British public; the audience's more positive response to Hopkins' would ultimately lead to her finishing the series in second place, winning over a legion of fans that actively contributed to her success in the competition. Prior to her *Celebrity Big Brother* debut, Hopkins had intentionally cultivated a controversial reputation and as such the exposure of her emotional vulnerability on national television came as a surprise to many observers; it also resulted in the media reflecting on the personality characteristics she would attempt to portray after the series had finished. Hopkins gained a significant number of fans during her appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother* and the decision as to whether she would purposefully portray this positive, less vitriolic version of her personality in future should have been a key concern in determining the future approach to her personal brand.

In the aftermath of her appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother*, it can be seen that Katie Hopkins has not taken advantage of her newly positive public reputation. Rather than capitalising on the goodwill formed during her period in the competition, Hopkins almost immediately returned to making inflammatory statements and publishing controversial columns; indeed, recent comments regarding illegal immigration made international headlines and sparked a petition that demanded her termination as a columnist with tabloid newspaper *The Sun*. It is clear that much of the public support cultivated by Katie Hopkins during *Celebrity Big Brother* has worn away in the months following her appearance, suggesting that her preference for taking the role of a villain rather than a popular celebrity within the media landscape. Although it is difficult to ascertain the reason that this decision was made, it could be suggested that Hopkins and her management team place a higher value on brand recognition than they place on the support of media consumers. If this is the case, Hopkins positive reception on *Celebrity Big Brother* should be perceived as a deviation on her construction of a public persona rather than a pivotal moment of transformation.

Regardless, Katie Hopkins' appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother* provided considerable insight into the construction of a controversial media image and the effect that celebrity reality television can have on undermining a public reputation that has been carefully cultivated over a number of year to elicit a specifically negative reaction.

Katie Hopkins' experience in *Celebrity Big Brother* essentially provides a cautionary tale for celebrities that are considering an appearance on similar reality television projects. On one level, shows like *Celebrity Big Brother* are an unrivalled medium by which a career can be reinvigorated or rehabilitated; on the other, the lack of control over a celebrity's public image means that participation in reality television effectively amounts to rolling the dice with an individual's reputation. Katie Hopkins entered the *Celebrity Big Brother* house with an established persona that directly appealed to traditional, conservative Britons; whilst despised by many, her supporters championed her for standing firmly behind her hyperbolic opinions. Upon leaving the program, however, the vulnerabilities Hopkins displayed throughout the series gave cause for detractors to suggest that her forthright stances were purposefully exacerbated to court controversy and public outrage. Hopkins and her team had little control over the editing of *Celebrity Big Brother* and, as such, her appearance in the program posed a considerable risk that should be taken into account by any public figure considering involvement in a reality television series. In a media climate wherein reality television and social media have achieved ascendancy, the lines between reality and public persona are inevitably blurred; in instances wherein a public figure's persona is not in complete harmony with their real character, a significant risk is taken when they chose to surrender control to editors and producers of reality television programming. As the case of Katie Hopkins demonstrates, participation in reality television programs like *Celebrity Big Brother* can ultimately result in the complication of a celebrity's brand and raise questions regarding their authenticity in a professional and personal context.

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